

TRAGEDY IN AMERICANIZING THE IMMIGRANT

Prof. Racca of the University of Rome Warns Against Criminals of Foreign Descent

"You are crushing out the moral influence of home and family life."
"You are alienating the children from the parents."
"You are leaving your immigrants to be exploited by scoundrels of their own race."
"You are letting your raw material go to waste."
"The degeneration of youth is threatening to undermine the very foundations of American society."
"Your schools are the best in the world because they teach so little."
"Your social settlements are spoiling the boys and girls and neglecting the fathers and mothers."

THESE assertions are made by no superficial visitor to America, but by a student of social conditions; a man who has spent the last fifteen months in New York observing with a trained eye, visiting the schools and the settlements, attending parents' meetings in the schoolhouses, sitting in the police courts, mingling with the people as one of them, talking in their own languages with immigrants and the sons of immigrants.

He is Dr. Vittorio Racca, associate professor of political economy in the University of Rome and author of more than 250 books and pamphlets on industrial, agricultural, commercial, financial and social topics. Born in Venice in 1876, he won such distinction at college that at the age of 22 the University of Parma conferred upon him the degree of doctor of laws. From 1899 to 1904 he was associate professor of political economy, the science of finance and social legislation at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. In 1902 he was employed by the Russian Government to make a study of state aid to agriculture in Italy. Two years later he was engaged by the American Institute of Social Service and the Musée Social of Paris to make a study of the social legislation of the Balkan countries. He has conducted other inquiries for the Italian Government. He is a member of most of the sociological societies of Europe. He is commander of the Order of the Crown of Italy.

A tall, clean shaven, brown eyed man, his face wrinkles up into the most winning of smiles as he talks. His hair has turned gray over his high, broad forehead.

Not content with what he has learned in his fifteen months stay, he intends to spend nine more months studying conditions in New York as he has studied them in almost every great city of Europe, northern Africa, western Asia and South America.

I asked him if the public schools were to blame for the fact that a large percentage of criminals in New York are sons and daughters of immigrants, boys and girls who have had the advantages of a New York public school education.

"I do not think so," he replied. "The public school is one of the grandest things that America has created. If it is judged by European standards much may be found to smile at, but when its effects upon society are observed the critical smile changes into most profound admiration."

"The United States had to solve a problem that was truly terrifying. Being, as it was, a new country, and having no already defined characters, it ran the risk of being submerged or denatured by the immense flood of immigrants constantly pouring in from the most widely different parts of the world. If America had not put forth its efforts to fuse and blend all these diverse peoples in its melting pot but had let them form themselves into homogeneous groups of different nationalities the result would have been disastrous. The race wars and the terrible problems which the living side by side of different nationalities has created in Austria, Germany and Russia would have been reproduced here, only on a larger scale."

"The great, indefinable soul of this

marvellous America, which seduces and conquers you from the first moment of your arrival, which gradually modifies you without your noticing it, has had something to do with breaking up and amalgamating these different nationalities; but the public school has been the most powerful force."

"It has taken the children of a hundred nationalities, a hundred races, a hundred religions, has poured them all into the melting-pot of its educational machine and has stamped indelible features upon the soft clay of their souls and minds."

"After a very short time these children are given to society, no more Jews, Italians, Turks or Poles, but Americans. The American public school has been reproached with teaching so little and with teaching that little badly. I say the public school is good, just because it teaches so little. The object of the public school is not to make every child a little encyclopædia freak. It has to teach the elements of knowledge, the three R's, but above all it must convert the child that is sent by its parents to school at 6 years of age into the American citizen of to-morrow, with a definite individuality, with a knowledge of what is awaiting him in life, and what his rights in and his duties to society are. This is the fundamental object of the school, and this the American schools are succeeding in better than any others."

"Then, if our schools are not to blame for the criminals referred to, what is to blame?" I asked.

"The conditions under which immigrants and the children of immigrants are obliged to live in your great cities. Before the little immigrant boy or girl makes the acquaintance of the school he makes that of the street. The first greeting he gets from children of his own age is ridicule, because he has the appearance, the speech and the manners of the country from which he came. His companions have no mercy upon him; wherever he goes, whomsoever he meets in the densely and indecently crowded district in which he lives, he is persecuted and vilified."

"The result is that whatever is his own becomes hateful to him; he thinks he must, at any cost, as quickly as possible, divest himself of that original sin, his nationality; he must, by speaking another language, by dressing in another style, by completely changing his own way of living, make those among whom he lives forget the crime of being of a certain race."

"That is why so many men of foreign birth actually hate the race from which they sprung and do all in their power that the fact of their belonging to it shall not be seen or felt."

"But against all his plans to succeed in this there rises one insurmountable obstacle. At home—that home which for you and me is heaven—he is ever upon thorns. There are his parents, who have not wished or known how to Americanize themselves, who remind him every day, every hour, of his crime of birth. Soon a sort of rancor for them arises; he feels himself even further and further apart from them; he returns home only to eat and sleep; he does not talk, and as soon as possible he escapes. Where? Anywhere but home!"

"If he is good and high principled he may go to a settlement house where he finds nice quarters, people ready to welcome him with open arms, games, amusements; where he is spoiled from every point of view; where, within broad limits, he finds all he wants. The social settlement continues admirably the work of the school in helping the development of his individuality and in instilling into him ideas of loyalty to his comrades. But it cannot give him any moral training any more than the school can, here or anywhere else. Besides it draws him even further away from the race to which he belongs, for the workers in the social settlements often do not know thoroughly its language and its spirit."

"If the lad is not so good there is no decent place in which he is welcome. He stays in the streets and in its de-



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pendencies—the saloon, the poolroom, the disorderly house. There, because it is easier to adopt a vice than a virtue, he rapidly acquires the speech, the behavior and the immoral ideas of the frequenters of these dens of perdition."

"Such a state of things would be terrible anywhere, but here it is a hundred times more terrifying by reason of the iniquitous condition of the police force. The youth who has begun to go with these gangsters has suddenly before him a spectacle that cannot but be demoralizing; vice, ostentatiously supreme in every part of the city; crime committed with the certainty of impunity; the worst elements of his own race prospering and enjoying life, while the poor

but honest who work hard are leading a life that is hell; criminals in close alliance with corrupt political machines which protect and aid them and with the police. All about him he sees the law shamelessly violated or enforced only occasionally against those who will not pay graft and have no friend higher up who in case of trouble can fix it up."

"The destructive effect that these corrupt surroundings have upon the mind of this young man is easy to see. The results are disastrous and every immigrant race is paying its tribute of tears and blood to this venomous dragon, as recent scandalous revelations have demonstrated."

"Religion and home life are the only

forces that can put a stop to this awful corruption of young men and girls, children of respectable parents."

"But religion has far too little hold upon them. The fathers and mothers sometimes remain true to the faith of their ancestors, but not the children. Their religion is generally different from that of Americans and they believe that to become Americans they must thrust their own aside."

"As for the moral influence of the home, it is still less. And here in my opinion is the most terrible wound that the degeneration of youth is inflicting and that threatens to undermine the very foundations of American society unless checked at once."

Causes of the Degeneration of the Youth—New Duties Proposed for Social Settlements

"America, this America that indirectly encourages him to come to it, because it needs his labor, does not bother itself about him at all when he is here, but abandons him to his fate."

"Without means, with few friends, and these making the same fierce struggle for life as he, he begins to try to adapt himself to his new surroundings. Only those who have lived among these people and, through being of the same race, have been able to obtain their intimate confidence, can have any idea of the terrible tragedy of the first period—which may last all his life—in the Americanization of an immigrant."

"He finds himself in an atmosphere of hostility; he is a competitor; he is the scum of the earth; he is avoided as if he and all his kin were nothing but a horde of criminals."

"The difference in language is an insurmountable barrier to him. This ignorance of English cuts him off for years or forever from contact with America. He is living in the country, but he has nothing in common with it."

"I have met men who had been twelve and fifteen years in America, but who had never heard of Washington and Lincoln and to whom—incredible as it may seem—Taft and Roosevelt were but names. And they were eager to learn!"

"The immigrant is thrown back upon the men of his own race, who talk his own language. Only too often these men exploit him basely for their own benefit. This is easy, because he is not aware of it; honest Americans pay no attention to it, and the dishonest are in league with the parasites who live at the expense of the poor of all races."

"To get work, the immigrant seeks employment agencies kept by men of his own nationality. These exploit him unscrupulously. So does the employer. And the wages the unfortunate fellow takes home at the end of the week are small, either because he is working at something utterly different from what he learned in Europe and consequently is unskilled, or because the employer, taking advantage of his ignorance of the prevailing rate of wages, pays him less than half what he should."

"He has absolutely no social life. The same evils that weigh upon him and his family weigh upon all his neighbors. Families that at home used to join each other in healthy, happy pleasures are oppressed with trouble and sometimes literally flee from each other's society rather than confess the woes of life in this country."

"If they need any help and advice they have no one to turn to but the 'prominent men' of their own race. These 'prominent men' are often uneducated, of very elastic morals and have risen to their place of 'prominence' by exploiting their fellow countrymen on the one hand, and by ingratiating themselves with the politicians, police and gangsters on the other."

"Thus, to whichever side he turns, the poor immigrant sees dishonesty and vice triumphant and honesty and hard work condemned to a life of misery."

"Notwithstanding all this, the great majority of these unfortunates succeed in the long run, leaving shreds of flesh along the road they climb; by indescribable struggles they little by little make for themselves a decent economic position. But many of them are crushed. Tuberculosis and other diseases carry them off. They go mad in the face of insurmountable difficulties; they give themselves up to crime."

"But by far the most terrible result of these artificial conditions which surround the adult immigrant is the complete destruction of his family life. All the moral influence of parents over children is taken away, and at the very time when the children are running the gravest perils and when there is the greatest necessity for preserving that morality without which any society is nothing but a den of wild beasts."

"Even when things are not so bad as this the children live with their parents, but their minds and thoughts are elsewhere."

"When, after a day of exhausting work under the worst of physical and moral conditions, the immigrant laborer returns home, he often has neither the will nor the power to busy himself with the moral education of his children."

"Ever, ever, ever, the family life is broken up, the influence of the moral teaching of parents is reduced to zero."

"Now we must never forget one fundamental fact: If we do not steal or kill it is not because we have been to school or to church, but because by word, by example and even by chastisement our fathers and our mothers have taught us it is wrong. The school, the church, the settlement can do nothing in the way of teaching morals. If we have not in our hearts the moral feelings that our own parents have instilled, all these other forms of social activity will do us no good."

"That is why in America to-day you have such startling moral degeneration, especially among immigrants and the children of immigrants. That is why boys and girls are growing up with a truly appalling lack of moral principles. All this is because the artificial life in which you compel the immigrants to live has tended directly to the inevitable result—the destruction of the home."

"And is there any remedy?"

"Fortunately there is. And it is quite simple. Americanize the children of immigrants, yes; but do not choke their souls. Do not stamp out all that mass of sentiments, ideas and habits that are the heirlooms of centuries of civilization and that can do no harm to the United States if preserved."

"The public schools should continue to teach all alike and to mould the children of immigrants into the type best adapted to the social and political life of the United States. But on coming out of school these children should find settlements in which Americans who know perfectly the language and country of their fathers will teach them to speak it, will tell them the greatness and the beauty of the land which gave them birth, will teach them to love it and to be proud of it. For example, a boy of Italian birth can best become a good American citizen by being loyal to his own great fatherland, Italy."

"But it is absurd to Americanize the children and not the fathers. It is equally absurd to hope that the Americanized children will Americanize their fathers. The sad experience you are having in America proves the impossibility of it."

"The social settlement instead of being a home for children of immigrants, ought to be a home for all immigrants. To them the adult immigrants should be able to go for help and counsel, as one goes to an older brother or sister."

"Under such conditions the poor immigrants would cease to feel lost in this country, would cease to hate it, would feel encouraged to adapt themselves to it as well as possible. Such social settlements would be castles of defence against the exploiters of every sort who live by swindling immigrants, if these could go to them for directions as to where work could be found and what pay they should receive."

"Then instead of turbulent elements, instead of future recruits for social revolutions the immigrants would become faithful and grateful citizens of this country. The number of those constrained by hardship and ignorance to become criminals would be reduced to a minimum."

"And if the parents were at least semi-Americanized the great abyss between them and their children would be filled up. Sons and daughters would no longer look upon fathers and mothers as inferiors."

"There in outline is the way that New York can save and put to good use thousands of immigrants and their children who are now being irretrievably lost. You are now like a great factory that is receiving an abundance of the very material it needs, and yet just for lack of proper and intelligent treatment is letting the greater part of it go to waste."

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